

**Report to the Schools Forum**

Meeting to be held on Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2026

**Item 7**

**Experts at Hand**

Contact for further information:

Schools Forum Clerk

[schoolsforum@lancashire.gov.uk](mailto:schoolsforum@lancashire.gov.uk)

**Brief Summary**

The report attached summarises a model for utilising the Experts at Hand funding to create Centrally Managed District-Led SEND Clusters.

**Recommendation**

The Forum is asked to:

- a) Note the report.



# Proposal for a Centrally Managed, District-Led SEND Cluster Model

## Purpose

This proposal recommends that Lancashire County Council (LCC) brings the strategic commissioning, financial management and accountability of the current Inclusion Hub model by developing the arrangements as district-led SEND Clusters. The model would retain strong local partnership working and decision-making, while aligning with Lancashire's SEND Reform Plan and the Department for Education's Experts at Hand approach.

The intention is not to replace successful local relationships or disregard the considerable work undertaken by hub leads, schools and commissioned partners. It is to create a broader, more equitable and sustainable system that maps need and provision across each district, identifies gaps and directs a significantly larger combined resource to the services and support that will have the greatest impact.

## Strategic context

The national SEND reforms place greater emphasis on early identification, inclusive mainstream practice, timely access to specialist expertise and stronger local partnerships across education, health and care. Experts at Hand funding is intended to enable local authorities and Integrated Care Boards to develop support that individual settings could not commission alone and to make specialist advice more accessible across early years settings, schools and further education colleges.

Lancashire's SEND Reform Plan already identifies district-based working as the foundation for a locally responsive Experts at Hand offer. It proposes stronger use of district intelligence, simplified access to support, specialist outreach, joint commissioning and clear accountability. A centrally managed, district-led model would provide the mechanism to convert these commitments into a consistent countywide approach.

The existing Inclusion Hubs have established valuable local networks, supported early intervention, developed staff confidence and helped children remain in mainstream education. Hub leaders have created approaches that reflect the differing needs and assets of their districts, often drawing together primary schools, pupil referral units, special schools, specialist services and external providers.

These achievements should be formally recognised and used as the starting point for the future SEND Cluster model. Existing relationships, effective interventions, evidence of impact and established provider arrangements should be mapped and, where they remain appropriate and offer value for money, incorporated into the new district plans. The change should therefore be understood as an evolution and expansion of the strongest local practice, rather than a loss of local ownership.

## Proposed operating model

Each district would operate through a SEND Cluster chaired by an Education Partnership Officer (EPO). Membership would include SENCOs, headteachers and relevant partners from across the district and across all age groups, including early years, maintained schools, academies and multi-academy trusts, special schools, alternative provision, further education, health, family services and parent and carer representatives. Each SEND Cluster



would have an assigned Educational Psychology link, specialist teacher link and finance officer or business support link.

The SEND Cluster would collectively:

- develop a shared district profile of need from birth to age 25;
- map existing universal, targeted and specialist provision, including commissioned, traded and community-based support;
- identify duplication, inequity, unmet need and gaps in access;
- agree district priorities and intended outcomes;
- decide and continuously evaluate how the district's local funding allocation is spent, within the agreed countywide framework and financial controls; and
- identify gaps in local provision and agree where additional support and resources need to be directed, while reviewing performance, impact, equality of access and value for money.
- Decide on best practice settings who could support others

LCC and the ICB would hold the budget centrally and undertake procurement, contracting, payments, financial monitoring, data assurance and contract management. This would remove the administrative burden from headteachers and other local leaders, who would no longer be required to hold funds, issue invoices or directly commission provision. Within the agreed countywide framework and financial controls, each SEND Cluster would decide how its local allocation should be used, based on the district's profile of need, identified gaps and agreed priorities.

For operational purposes, Fylde and Wyre would form one SEND Cluster district, Hyndburn and Rossendale would form one SEND Cluster district, and Lancaster and Ribble Valley would form one SEND Cluster district. All other districts would continue on their existing district footprint unless subsequently agreed otherwise.

At this stage, post-16 provision should operate through a dedicated countywide Post-16 SEND Cluster rather than through the district-based arrangements. This will enable colleges, specialist post-16 and post-19 providers, training providers and relevant partners to address the sector's distinct patterns of need, transition points, curriculum pathways, preparation for adulthood and sufficiency pressures. The relationship between this cluster and the district clusters should be reviewed as the model develops.

Each cluster will maintain a clear directory of provision, structured as a graduated offer from which settings can identify and request the most appropriate level of support. This will include a universal offer available to all schools and settings; targeted support for some schools and settings where additional capacity or development is required; targeted-plus support focused on individual children and young people whose needs require more intensive or coordinated intervention; and specialist targeted support for children and young people with the most complex needs. The directory will set out the nature and level of each offer, intended cohort, eligibility and access arrangements, provider capacity and expected outcomes. It will be treated as a developing resource and refined over time in response to local intelligence, stakeholder feedback, commissioning decisions, gaps in provision and evidence of impact.

### **Integrated outreach pathway and single front door**

The SEND Cluster model, chaired by the EPO and supported by its assigned Educational Psychology, specialist teacher and finance or business support links, would bring together under one centrally coordinated arrangement the outreach activity currently delivered by



commissioned partners, special schools, pupil referral units and Inclusion Hub leads. This would create one cohesive, graduated pathway rather than a series of separate offers, referral routes and funding arrangements.

Schools would have a single front door eventually although perhaps not initially, through which they could request advice, outreach, early intervention, respite, short-term intervention or placement support. Requests would be considered against a shared district picture of need, with the district lead coordinating the most appropriate response and drawing on the combined expertise and capacity of the partnership. This would reduce duplication, make access clearer and quicker, and ensure that children receive the least restrictive and most proportionate support at the earliest opportunity.

The pathway would support a deliberate shift in the role of pupil referral units towards outreach, early intervention, time-limited placements and successful reintegration, with permanent exclusion treated as a last resort. It would also allow LCC to manage PRU capacity and finances more strategically, commissioning the right mix of outreach and intervention places in response to current district need rather than relying on fixed historic arrangements.

Permanent exclusions have reduced over the last year. While this is a positive outcome for children and reflects the impact of earlier intervention, it has reduced demand for long-term PRU places and has made some existing PRU financial models unsustainable. The proposed model would remove the current cap on intervention activity and enable LCC and the SEND clusters to commission flexible intervention places for the most vulnerable children when they are required. Funding would follow evidenced need and agreed outcomes, giving LCC greater control over expenditure while supporting PRUs to adapt their offer in a planned and financially sustainable way.

### **Central management of PRU capacity through SEND Clusters**

Each PRU offer should be centrally managed through its relevant SEND Cluster, within the countywide commissioning and accountability framework. This would enable the cluster to maintain a single, current view of waiting lists, commissioned places, intervention places, outreach capacity and emerging demand across the district. Decisions about access should be made consistently against agreed thresholds and a shared assessment of need, ensuring that scarce capacity is directed to the children and young people with the greatest need rather than being determined by separate referral routes, historic arrangements or the order in which requests are received.

The number and balance of commissioned PRU places should be capable of flexing in response to demand in each area. SEND Clusters should therefore be able to recommend adjustments between outreach, short-term intervention and longer transitional provision, subject to affordability, safeguarding, quality standards and the availability of suitable capacity. This would support a more responsive use of resources, reduce avoidable waiting times and provide greater transparency about how high-needs provision is allocated.

A key condition for this model is a stronger and more consistent approach to successful reintegration from PRUs. PRU placements should be purposeful, regularly reviewed and linked from the outset to an agreed destination and reintegration plan wherever this is appropriate for the individual child. Effective reintegration will release capacity for other children and create a sustainable “revolving door” across the three-tier graduated alternative provision model: targeted support in mainstream settings, time-limited intervention placements and transitional placements for children requiring more intensive support. Performance measures should therefore include the timeliness, sustainability and outcomes



of reintegration, alongside attendance, progress, repeat referrals, exclusions and use of commissioned capacity.

### **Funding and resource allocation**

The district resource would combine the current Inclusion Hub funding with the relevant Experts at Hand allocation and any other agreed local inclusion funding that can appropriately be aligned from the High Needs block. This would create a materially larger district pot than is available through the present primary-focused model and extend access across the full 0–25 education system, including early years settings, primary and secondary schools, academies, special schools, alternative provision and colleges.

Allocations should be based on a transparent formula that reflects population, deprivation, SEND prevalence, suspensions and permanent exclusions, attendance, demand for statutory assessment, local sufficiency, travel patterns and other indicators of vulnerability. Subject to the agreed countywide framework and financial controls, each SEND Cluster would determine how its local allocation is spent and would identify gaps where support or additional capacity needs to be directed.

Each district would have an agreed annual delivery plan and outcome framework. Funding decisions would need to demonstrate a clear connection between identified need, the proposed intervention, expected benefits, cost and measures of success. Commissioning should favour evidence-informed approaches that strengthen settings' capacity, provide early help, prevent escalation and improve outcomes for children and young people. Settings would provide termly evidence of impact through a survey of SENCOs, using anonymised child-level information, so that clusters can monitor whether support has enabled children and young people to remain in their current school or setting; whether an Education, Health and Care needs assessment or EHCP has subsequently been sought; whether a special school place has been required; whether a place in a local authority-created inclusion base has been required; or whether needs have been met within the school's own internal inclusion base. The findings will support evaluation, learning and refinement of the offer over time.

The district allocation should also support flexible commissioning from PRUs, special schools and other approved partners for outreach, respite, assessment, reintegration and time-limited intervention. Removing a fixed intervention cap would allow resources to be deployed in response to the number and complexity of children requiring support, subject to agreed thresholds, affordability, available capacity and regular review of outcomes.

The revenue offer will sit alongside wider investment in inclusive capacity. Schools are receiving £2 million through the initial capital programme to undertake practical projects that make their environments more inclusive. A further £4 million is proposed to continue and widen this approach across schools, early years settings and post-16 providers, enabling more children and young people to have their needs met locally. Settings will also continue to have access to free, in-house visual impairment and hearing impairment sensory support, together with a free SEND training package delivered through LPDS and the Specialist Teaching Service. These complementary investments should be clearly presented as part of the overall offer so that settings understand the full range of support available.

A current potential draft would suggest using the former Schools Forum methodology as the starting point. The figures below retain the existing district-level calculations for transparency; the final SEND Cluster allocations will need to aggregate the relevant district shares for Fylde and Wyre, Hyndburn and Rossendale, and Lancaster and Ribble Valley.



| District / Hub                 | Previous 2026/27 allocation | Share of total | Indicative 2027/28 allocation |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|
| Lancaster and Ribble Valley    | £109,601                    | 10.44%         | <b>£949,940</b>               |
| Fylde and Wyre                 | £129,765                    | 12.36%         | <b>£1,124,650</b>             |
| Preston                        | £157,449                    | 15.00%         | <b>£1,364,860</b>             |
| South Ribble                   | £88,037                     | 8.38%          | <b>£762,500</b>               |
| West Lancashire                | £90,705                     | 8.64%          | <b>£786,160</b>               |
| Chorley                        | £101,433                    | 9.66%          | <b>£878,970</b>               |
| Hyndburn, Rossendale           | £184,054                    | 17.53%         | <b>£1,595,090</b>             |
| Burnley                        | £91,870                     | 8.75%          | <b>£796,170</b>               |
| Pendle                         | £97,086                     | 9.25%          | <b>£841,660</b>               |
| <b>Total district envelope</b> | <b>£1,050,000</b>           | <b>100%</b>    | <b>£9,100,000</b>             |

This would be based on :

| Component                                                           | Countywide planning assumption |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Existing Inclusion Hub baseline                                     | £1.0m (HNB)                    |
| Experts at Hand district provision and outreach                     | £7.9m (EAH)                    |
| Flexible PRU/intervention capacity                                  | £0.8m (HNB)                    |
| <b>Indicative district funding</b>                                  | <b>£9.7m</b>                   |
| Central contingency, quality assurance and countywide commissioning | £0.1m                          |
| <b>Total</b>                                                        | <b>£9.8m</b>                   |

## Role of current hub headteachers and partners in SEND Clusters

Headteachers who currently lead Inclusion Hub activity would be invited to remain key strategic partners within their SEND Cluster, should they wish to do so. Their knowledge of local need, school practice, provider quality and effective approaches would be essential to planning and scrutiny. Their role would shift from budget holder and commissioner to



influential system leader and partner in collective decision-making alongside SENCOs, headteachers and partners from all age groups.

Existing partnerships and commissioned arrangements should be reviewed rather than automatically discontinued. Where provision is effective, meets an evidenced priority, is accessible across the relevant age range and represents value for money, the district partnership may recommend that LCC continues or recommissions it through the new model.

### **Workforce considerations**

Some hubs may have staff employed wholly or substantially to deliver current Inclusion Hub activity. LCC should complete an early workforce and contractual review to identify affected roles, employing organisations, funding arrangements, notice periods and any employment or transfer implications. No assumption should be made that every post will continue or cease.

Each case should be considered transparently against the district needs assessment, future service specification, evidence of impact, affordability and procurement requirements. Where a role or service continues to meet an identified need, the district partnership may recommend that LCC commissions it for a defined period. Appropriate consultation, HR and legal advice should be built into the transition process.

### **Governance and accountability**

The SEND partnership board and Education Partnership Board should set the strategic framework, approve the allocation methodology, monitor delivery and ensure consistency with the Local SEND Reform Plan. Each SEND Cluster would be chaired by an EPO and supported by an assigned Educational Psychology link, specialist teacher link and finance officer or business support link. SEND Clusters would decide how their local allocation is spent within the agreed framework, identify gaps in provision and direct support towards local priorities, with formal decisions and expenditure authorised in accordance with LCC financial and procurement rules.

Each SEND Cluster would report to and be monitored by the High Needs Working Group. The group would provide governance and constructive challenge by reviewing cluster performance, delivery against agreed outcomes, use of funding, equity of access and value for money. This oversight would also provide a clear route for SEND Clusters to raise emerging pressures, identify barriers and request further advice, challenge or support where required.

A common service specification and performance framework should include measures such as reach across phases and types of setting, timeliness of support, improved setting confidence and capability, attendance, suspensions and permanent exclusions, successful transitions, reduced escalation of need, family experience, equity of access, outcomes and value for money. Data should be reviewed at district and county level to support challenge, learning and reallocation where necessary.

### **Transition and implementation**

The current Inclusion Hub arrangements should conclude in an orderly way by 31 March 2027, with all commitments, expenditure, contracts, staffing arrangements, assets, data and outstanding liabilities reconciled. A consultation meeting with the proposed SEND Clusters and wider stakeholders will take place in September to support co-design of the final model, governance arrangements, district priorities and implementation plan.



SEND Clusters will meet monthly during the initial stages of implementation so that relationships, local intelligence, funding decisions and emerging delivery issues can be considered promptly. The frequency can be reviewed once the model is established.

Separate early years meetings will initially be held to support meaningful engagement with the sector and ensure that its needs and contribution are properly understood. Early years representatives will also need to participate in the main SEND Cluster, particularly where funding priorities and allocations are considered, so that decisions are fair and reflect need across the full age range.

#### Timeline

October - Stakeholder meetings at district level to share data of the needs we have, establish the needs in the area settings are seeing, the providers already commissioned and available, understand training needs of the cohort – early years partners will have separate district conferences to discuss wider issues such as GLD alongside.

November -

The transition should be managed in five phases:

1. **Assurance and engagement:** confirm the current position in every hub; engage hub leads, settings, providers, staff, and partners; and publish clear transition principles.
2. **Needs and provision mapping:** create a consistent 0–25 district dataset and directory of existing support, contracts, workforce and outcomes.
3. **Design and consultation:** establish SEND Clusters on the agreed district footprints; hold the October stakeholder meeting with cluster members and wider stakeholders; confirm membership, support links, governance, allocation methodology, priorities, service specifications and outcome measures.
4. **Commissioning and mobilisation:** complete compliant procurement or grant processes, confirm workforce arrangements and provide settings with a single, clear route to support.
5. **Review and improvement:** undertake quarterly monitoring and a formal first-year evaluation, using data and stakeholder feedback to refine the model.

#### Key benefits

- A coherent 0–25 inclusion offer rather than support focused mainly on primary schools.
- Greater district resources through alignment of existing funding and DfE investment.
- Decisions based on a complete picture of local need, provision and gaps.
- Earlier and easier access to multidisciplinary advice and support.
- Reduced administrative and financial burden on headteachers.
- Stronger procurement, contract management, accountability and value for money.
- Continued local influence through genuine partnership governance.
- More equitable access across maintained settings, academies and colleges.
- Improved ability to prevent escalation, exclusion and unnecessary use of higher-cost provision.



- A single front door and cohesive pathway for advice, outreach, respite, intervention and placement support.
- Greater strategic and financial control of PRU capacity, with resources redirected towards outreach, intervention and reintegration as permanent exclusions reduce.

### Risks and mitigations

| Risk                                                      | Mitigation                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Loss of local ownership or trusted relationships          | Retain current hub leaders as key partners, use co-design and preserve effective local arrangements where justified.         |
| Disruption to children, settings or providers             | Use phased transition plans, honour lawful commitments and maintain continuity for priority support.                         |
| Uncertainty for staff                                     | Complete early workforce mapping, communicate clearly and apply fair case-by-case processes with HR and legal advice.        |
| Funding becomes fragmented or substitutes existing duties | Apply clear grant conditions, maintain transparent budget lines and approve activity against an agreed strategic framework.  |
| District variation creates inequity                       | Use common minimum standards, a transparent allocation formula, countywide quality assurance and published performance data. |
| Decision-making is slow                                   | Define delegated authority, annual commissioning cycles and a rapid-response route for urgent need.                          |

### Recommendations

1. Approve in principle the move to a centrally managed, district-led SEND Cluster model.
2. Recognise formally the contribution and impact of existing Inclusion Hubs and commit to retaining effective practice, partnerships and provision where these meet future district priorities.
3. Commission a rapid baseline review covering need, provision, contracts, finance, workforce, outcomes and outstanding commitments in every district.
4. Establish SEND Clusters attended by SENCOs, headteachers and relevant partners across all age groups, chaired by an EPO and supported by assigned Educational Psychology, specialist teacher and finance or business support links.
5. Require each SEND Cluster to report to the High Needs Working Group for performance monitoring, governance and constructive challenge, with a clear route to request further support where required.
6. Develop a transparent district funding formula, common service specification, outcome framework and decision-making protocol.
7. Transfer budget holding, procurement, contracting, payment and monitoring responsibilities to LCC while preserving collaborative local priority-setting.
8. Agree a workforce transition protocol for staff employed specifically through current hub arrangements, with decisions taken individually and lawfully.
9. Confirm a revised implementation timetable that reflects the current date and protects continuity of support.



10. Design and implement a single district front door that brings together the outreach offers of commissioned partners, special schools, pupil referral units and Inclusion Hub leads within one graduated pathway.
11. Review the PRU funding and commissioning model to support a planned shift towards outreach, early intervention, time-limited placements and reintegration, removing the fixed intervention cap and commissioning flexible capacity according to evidenced need.
12. Place PRU waiting lists, commissioned places, intervention places and outreach capacity under the strategic management of the relevant SEND Cluster, using agreed thresholds to prioritise children with the greatest need and allowing the commissioned mix of provision to flex in response to local demand.
13. Establish a dedicated countywide Post-16 SEND Cluster at this stage; require every cluster to maintain and progressively refine a directory of provision; implement termly anonymised SENCO impact monitoring; and communicate the complementary capital, sensory-support and free SEND training available to settings.

#### Appendix A – Brochure for EAH

